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SUBJECT: POLITICS DOMINATE AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH
EMERGENCY SITUATIONS MINISTER

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Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During the Ambassador's introductory meeting with Emergency Situations Minister Mher Shahgeldian on November 4, Shahgeldian shared his views on the current political situation in Armenia and related his priorities for the Ministry, while also upbeat about the upcoming DOD Biological Threat Reduction Program. He agreed that the ongoing detention of citizens arrested in relation to the presidential election hurt Armenia's political development and international image. That said, Shahgeldian lamented the opposition's obstructionist approach, and said they also had a responsibility in restoring Armenia's social cohesion in wake of the March 1 unrest. END SUMMARY.

VIEWS ON POLITICAL DETAINEES

¶2. (C) On November 4, Ambassador Yovanovitch paid an introductory call on Armenia's relatively new Minister of Emergency Situations Mher Shahgeldian, the first person to hold the position since it was created in April. The new Ministry has under its umbrella the Armenian Rescue Service (a uniformed, paramilitary service), the Seismic Protection Service, Technical Safety Center, Hydrometeorological Monitoring Center, and State Reserves Service. The Ministry was essentially assembled for political reasons this past spring, in order to create a ministerial portfolio for the Rule of Law Party, after it joined the governing coalition. The government combined what had been five independent agencies under one roof and made it a ministry. Prior to being named a minister, Shahgeldian was a forward-leaning oppositionist who managed then-opposition leader Artur Baghdassarian's February 2008 presidential campaign.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador solicited the views of the Minister, in his capacity as a leading Armenian politician in the Rule of Law Party, on the GOAM's handling of the post-election crisis, in particular the issue of the 70-plus political detainees. Shahgeldian acknowledged that the issue was a very important one for Armenia, and he appreciated the Ambassador's and international community's interest in solving the thorny issue. The Minister said it was his party's understanding that those detainees who did not commit any crime will eventually be released, after the various judicial processes had run their course. He expressed hope that the National Assembly's ad hoc commission tasked with studying the March 1 unrest would contribute to a resolution of this issue.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador replied that the handling of the

detainees remained of great concern to the U.S., pointing out the troubling appearance that opposition supporters had been detained because of their political orientation, and that the administration of justice in these cases was being carried out arbitrarily and unfairly, as political retribution. The Ambassador cautioned that the longer the situation continued, the more it hindered Armenia's political development, and the more it compromised Armenia's image in the international community. She urged Shahgeldian in his role as a reformist politician and minister to help the authorities turn the page on this issue. Instead of the questionable judicial processes underway, the Ambassador suggested the authorities seriously contemplate a general amnesty of all of the detainees.

ON REFORMS, DEMOCRACY ISSUES

15. (C) Minister Shahgeldian acknowledged the negative impact that the detainee issue and unresolved post-election situation was having on Armenia's image and democratic development. He complained, however, that democratic progress depended on Armenian society's cohesion, and that the opposition led by ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) was impeding GOAM efforts to restore this cohesion by boycotting successive dialogue initiatives launched by the authorities. While Shahgeldian noted that the establishment of a Public Chamber and the creation of the March 1 ad hoc commission were not cure-alls for the situation, they were good-faith steps taken by the authorities to designed to collectively address the post-election upheaval. Shahgeldian added that he thought the upcoming Yerevan mayor's election would also be an opportunity for the opposition to make their voice heard, if they chose to do so. (COMMENT: Even while

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still in the opposition, the Rule of Law party was a rival to Ter-Petrossian's opposition coalition, and the two parties threw some sharp elbows at each other in their competition. END COMMENT.)

16. (C) The Ambassador replied that the success of such initiatives ultimately depended on a level playing field for all, one that measured up to international standards, and that the government was ultimately responsible for providing such a framework. The Ambassador commented that the opposition's firmly held view was that the authorities were not interested in a genuine dialogue, but instead abused their position in power and the administrative resources at their disposal to weaken their opponents. The Ambassador urged the authorities to be inclusive as they could be while in power, so that the losers at election time could be constructive in defeat.

17. (C) Shahgeldian maintained that election reforms continued to be a priority for his Rule of Law party as it sought to advance Armenia's democratization. The Minister lamented the absence in Armenia of civilized political competition, and said "black PR" and fomenting "political hatred" were issues the country had to grapple with. Shahgeldian told the Ambassador it was refreshing for him that morning to hear Senator McCain's and President-elect Obama's concession and victory speeches, and said he hoped to see the day when such political maturity reigned in Armenia.

PRIORITIES OF NEW MINISTRY

18. (C) Since assuming the helm of the newly created Ministry of Emergency Situations in April, Shahgeldian's priorities have been on the training of personnel, updating the equipment needed for the ministry's five agencies to do their various jobs, and promoting cooperation with regional and international partners. Shahgeldian said the inverse

relationship between the meager financial resources at its disposal and the more complex tasks it must address has driven him to pursue public-private partnerships. His ministry is putting the final touches on a concept plan to reorient the ministry away from a reliance on state resources to attracting private sector interest and funding. He said one of the biggest obstacles he faced was reforming the Soviet mindsets and practices that still imbue Armenia's approach to crisis management.

¶9. (C) On specific ongoing programs, Shahgeldian talked about initiating a genuine 911 emergency service by the end of the year. He also said the MES was working with Japanese government help to modernize the fire and rescue services in Yerevan. Another project is the elaboration of an insurance system to indemnify citizens and business people against natural or man-made disasters. Shahgeldian said he had just submitted for government approval a plan to establish a network of anti-hail stations to protect Armenia's vulnerable agriculture from ruin.

BULLISH ON BTRP PROGRAM

¶10. (C) The Ambassador said the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Embassy were excited about the imminent launch of the Biological Threat Reduction Program (BTRP) in Armenia.

(NOTE: The GOAM recently designated the MES to be the executive agent of the program in Armenia. END NOTE.) Minister Shahgeldian said the subject of the program -- biosafety and biosecurity -- was very important to Armenia, and that he viewed the BTRP as an example of strategic cooperation. The Minister noted DoD's recent increase of year one funding for BTRP -- from USD 5 million to USD 9 million -- as an indicator of the seriousness of the BTRP for both countries. Shahgeldian pledged to support the program as much as he could, hoped it would become a long-term partnership and serve as a future basis for even greater U.S.-Armenian cooperation in such spheres.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Shahgeldian has always seemed to us a sincere reformer with democratic values, while completely loyal to his perhaps less high-minded party leader, Artur Baghdassarian. As a newly-minted government minister, Shahgeldian has several challenges to overcome: the need to defend the government's position, in spite of any private opinions to the contrary; his own lack of executive branch

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experience, having previously worked only in parliamentary and political party structures; and a weak political hand to play in the intra-mural bureaucratic tussles inevitable in government policymaking.

¶12. (C) Shahgeldian appears to be approaching management of his new ministry with real seriousness of purpose. A technocratic approach probably offers his best chance to make a difference in government, whereas a more politicized agenda within the cabinet would only underline Shahgeldian's -- and the Rule of Law Party's -- lack of real heft within the ruling party establishment. While the party's place in the governing coalition offers the GOAM a marginal benefit -- creating some basis to claim a pluralistic and inclusive coalition -- this window dressing is transparent to the Armenian electorate. The Rule of Law Party is fundamentally expendable if its members step out of line, which is what happened in 2006, the last time the GOAM unceremoniously tossed the Rule of Law party out of the ruling coalition. This time around the party's weakness is far more apparent, and its freedom of discretion most likely even less.

